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CHAPTER IV

SPECIAL ASPECTS OF CHINESE SOCIETY IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

MOST readers of this survey will be acquainted, at least in a general way, with the problems of China itself and with the direction in which the people of that country have moved in the last fifty years. What will be attempted in this chapter will be to illustrate the way in which the Chinese of Southeast Asia have in some respects deviated from the central pattern under the influence of local conditions. We shall select for this purpose the special aspects of the family, marriage, religion, and education, with some remarks on the opium question. As regards politics, Chapter XXXI, dealing with Chinese political organization in Malaya, brings out the developments which are typical of the area as a whole, and to this the reader is referred should he wish to gain a general impression of the matter before proceeding to the separate country studies.

The Family. An excellent starting-point for our chapter is the work of Dr Ta Chen, who, in 1934 and 1935 was in charge of a group of investigators studying the emigrant communities in eastern Kwangtung and southern Fukien under the auspices of the International Research Committee of the Institute of Pacific Relations.[1] The area selected for study was a region from which many of the emigrants to the Nanyang originated and where their families mostly live. It is on the sea coast of the two southernmost maritime provinces and consists of ten *hsien* (counties). Roughly speaking, it includes a long strip of territory beginning at Chao An (formerly Chao Chou), passing through Swatow on the Kwangtung border, and through Amoy, and ending at Chuan Chou (Ch'üan-chow) in Fukien. It is an area of a little less than 5,000 square miles with a total population of a little over 4·6 million in 1935.[2]

[1] Ta Çhen (the name is properly Chen Ta, Chen being the surname, and it is thus given in some library catalogues), *Emigrant Communities in South China: a Study of Overseas Migration and its Influence on Standards of Living and Social Change*, English ed. by Bruno Lasker (New York, Institute of Pacific Relations, 1940).

[2] Though all the *hsien* have sent emigrants to the Nanyang the area does not constitute the sole source of emigration to the south, even from these two provinces. For example, Mei Hsien and vicinity, the principal home of the Hakkas and the largest source of Hakka emigration, is not included in this area.

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Here two distinct aggregations of Chinese live side by side—the non-emigrant and the emigrant community—from which a large proportion of the emigrants to the Nanyang are drawn and the income of whose families is (except under unusual circumstances such as the later war with Japan) augmented by remittances from their menfolk overseas. These two communities in a clear way illustrate many of the differences that distinguish the stay-at-home Chinese from those who have sought their fortunes abroad.

Judged from the natural and socio-economic facts, the non-emigrant community was (at the time of Dr Ta Chen's investigations) typical of farm life in south China. The principal occupation was the cultivation of rice, and this was supplemented by many subsidiary occupations, including poultry raising and fruit growing. After the harvest, men and women of the poorer classes picked up fuel and burned charcoal in the mountains for sale in the village market. It was a simple pattern of livelihood not differing in any essential from that of thousands of villages in any other part of rural China. The emigrant community, too, had a variety of occupations, but these did not yield them sufficient income to maintain their present style of living. To quote an experienced physician with Western training who had for many years resided in such a community: 'The children of the well-to-do emigrant families are well fed and clothed. They are easy-going and usually without a definite occupation. If by mischance the family's business in the Nanyang should be bankrupt, these people will be obliged to support themselves by begging.'[1] This statement was thought to be something of an exaggeration, but to bring out the variable factor in the life of an emigrant community. (There were, of course, also families with no sons abroad living in the emigrant community. In these families the pattern of livelihood was much the same as that in a non-emigrant community.)

Before proceeding with a summary comparison of these two sets of families, it is appropriate to remark that those who emigrated from China usually did so to improve their social status. They were, on the whole, therefore, drawn from the less prosperous families, and the process to be described was not merely that of subjecting identical social material to different influences.

In the non-emigrant community, out of 725 families studied, 650 were engaged in growing rice. One hundred and thirty of these owned

[1] Ta Chen, op. cit. pp. 59, 60.

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incomes by work at home or in local workshops. The drawn-thread and embroidery work engaged in by the girls and middle-aged women in their spare time earned them about twenty cents a day per person. Others wove cloth at small weaving-shops or sewed in tailors'-shops, earning about thirty cents a day. None of these occupations were, in fact, particularly remunerative. Older women were engaged in making joss-paper or in knitting fishing-nets. Apart from farming and trade, the men were engaged in relatively few occupations—there were coolies, barbers, carpenters, school-teachers, and fishermen.

We come now to the subject of remittances from the Nanyang regarding which there has been much conflicting evidence. No satisfactory estimate of these remittances has been made for South-east Asia as a whole, and in any case their value has varied greatly with the fluctuation in trade.[1] There had been a time when the ownership of a few rubber-trees had meant affluence, when Chinese importers in the Nanyang could undersell those of all other nationalities and still make a large profit, 'and when they had the native peasants so under control through indebtedness that they could sell them almost anything at any price'.[2]

There had been times when labour was so scarce that Chinese coolies could in a few years accumulate savings enough to start in business, and when employees of Chinese retailers could force up wages to the point where it was more economical for the employer to take them in as partners. But by 1935 all this had changed. New immigration restrictions, motivated by the depression, had cut large numbers of Chinese labourers off from labour opportunities abroad while, at the same time, life had become, perhaps, a little more secure in this time of general débâcle for a certain privileged few—for example, the small retail traders already established in the Nanyang who had less competition to meet from their countrymen and who could circumvent the new head tax on males by bringing women and children from China to take the place of male assistants.

(This investigation, we must remember, dates from a time when Southeast Asia was only just beginning to recover from the trade depression of 1929–32.)

[1] In 1941 about SS $10 million was remitted to China from Malaya, but there is nothing to indicate how much of this was in the ordinary way of trade.

[2] This is placed in quotation marks to indicate that it represents the views of Dr Ta Chen.

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Dr Ta Chen gives a table (p. 83) of the sources of income of 100 emigrant families from October 1934 to September 1935 which shows that the average monthly remittance per family was 81·4 per cent. of the total income, ranging between 75·5 per cent. for incomes below $20 per mensem, and 84·1 per cent. for incomes between $125 and $250. This enabled the emigrant families to maintain a much higher standard of living as a whole than those families which had no source of assistance from abroad.

Apart from the purely economic effects of overseas migration upon these communities of east Kwangtung and south Fukien, there is evidence to show that intercourse with Southeast Asia was having a considerable modifying effect on the social institutions, religion, and general outlook both of the emigrants themselves and of the families in China whence they came and to which usually they eventually returned.

In China the social unit has immemorially been the family, and it remains so except to the extent that it has broken down in Communist areas under the influence of Communist ideology. The system which has as its object the perpetuation of the family tree, to a considerable extent subordinates the individual to its needs. But in these emigrant communities in China and in the Nanyang itself, it has had to undergo a great deal of modification to survive. Where resources permit, a dual family system has grown up, whereby one section lives in China and the other in the Nanyang. This dual, or joint family, takes a number of forms which may vary; in the case of a well-off family (to give an example) the head of the family aged 61 lives in Siam, his wife (aged 58) lives in the ancestral village in China and is the acting head of the family, the first concubine (56) is a Siamese and lives in Siam, the second concubine (44) is in the village, and the third and fourth concubines (both Chinese, aged 30 and 19) are also in Siam, and the children of the unions are, except for the son by the wife who is with his father in Siam, all with their mothers, either in Siam or in China. An example of a middle-class family is of a father aged 77 in the village, his son aged 50, the head of the family, in Singapore, and his wife (the acting head of the family) in the village in China. The head of the family had his concubine in Singapore, and the offspring, either of the head of the family or his brothers (who belong to the family) were either in Singapore or at home. A third case of a lower-class family is a more simple pattern with the head of

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the family in Siam, his wife (acting head of the family) in the village in China, and most of the children of the marriage in China.

Such arrangements obviously call for careful financing. The emigrant abroad, after deducting what he needs to meet his expenses, usually remits his savings periodically to his home in China for the support of the family there and to meet extraordinary expenses, such as of a marriage in the family. At the same time the family home in China is a kind of insurance for the emigrant, for he can always return there if he is unemployed.

The influence of the emigrant on the age-old ideas and customs of his home village has been great. If he has had much foreign experience he almost invariably condemns the traditional family arrangement. In the words of a returned tin-miner from Malaya:[1]

> The joint family is an obnoxious social institution. When a member of such a family earns money he is obliged to support all the rest of it and to carry a heavy economic burden. I have had a very bitter experience and always felt that I am virtually the slave of my family. They are of no help to me at all.

A critical attitude towards the family and marriage systems is very general among returned emigrants. They remark that living in the modern world is a complicated affair, and that the joint family is no longer practicable. Many of them felt (in 1935) that an early disintegration of the family in south China was inevitable. Moreover, many of the emigrants have seen what marriage may mean in modern Western life when love and courtship enter into the marriage preliminaries and the union is (or should be) based on affection. An emigrant inevitably contrasts this with the Chinese system wherein the husband and wife are often unknown to one another before marriage. Stubborn and resistant as the traditional family system is, there is evidence from all over the Nanyang that as regards marriage the traditional procedure is in retreat before the modern marriage, and that the joint family system is being strained in some cases almost to breaking-point. Again, in the Nanyang itself, the increased mobility of members of the family is a force threatening to loosen its bonds.

In spite of these tendencies, marriage custom among the Chinese in the Nanyang at the time of the outbreak of the war between Japan and the Allies in 1941 generally followed Chinese traditional

[1] Ta Chen, op. cit. p. 142.